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ABSTRACT

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) developed from the study of second language teaching, and includes the study of the learning setting, learner variables, the nature of the target language and the learner native language, and the reasons for language learning. Much SLA research to date focuses on one or another of these dimensions (linguistic, social psychological, or cognitive) rather than being multidimensional. Among approaches that address more than one dimension are Schumann's acculturation model, Krashen's monitor theory, Hatch and Hawkins' integrated model, and Wong Fillmore and Swain's model. According to Long's definitions of the two types of theory, none of these is a sufficiently comprehensive theory of SLA, despite their contributions to the field. (MSE)

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Overview of Theories of Language Learning and Acquisition

Diane Larsen-Freeman

People have been interested in second language acquisition (SLA) since antiquity, but in recent times much of the research emphasis has, in fact, been placed on language *teaching*. In the early sixties, for example, large-scale studies comparing different language teaching methodologies were conducted. Much to the disappointment of advocates of one or another methodology, the results of the comparative studies proved to be inconclusive. Disillusioned by this finding and affected by the behaviorist versus cognitivist debate in psychology and the Chomskian revolution in linguistics, second language researchers' attention began to shift from the teaching process to the learning process. It was this shift in perspective which introduced a new research agenda and which gave definition to the field that has come to be known as second language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman and Long, forthcoming).

In order to attain their goal of facilitating bilingualism, SLA researchers realized that they would have to take into account, as a minimum, the following factors:

- The setting in which the learning/acquisition takes place (in a classroom or in an untutored environment; in a second language or in a foreign language context);
- Learner variables (age; aptitude; motivation; cognitive style; social, psychological, experiential, maturational, neurological, and personal factors);
- The nature of the target language to be acquired and the native language of the learner, and the similarities/differences between them;
- The reasons why the learning is being undertaken at all (to assimilate into a new cultural community, to travel as a tourist, to pass an examination, to obtain employment, to read scientific texts).

In sum, the scope of SLA research would have to be sufficiently broad to include a variety of learners who speak a variety of native languages,

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who are in the process of acquiring a variety of second languages in a variety of settings for a variety of reasons (Larsen-Freeman and Long, forthcoming).

Given the enormous scope of the task, small wonder that much SLA research focuses on one relevant dimension or another of the SLA conundrum, rather than being multidimensional in nature. Thus, there are SLA researchers who operate mainly from a linguistic perspective. They assume that language learners possess certain innate language learning capacities that are activated in response to the target language input to which the learners are exposed. Other linguistic explanations are invoked as well. "It is clear that an explanatory account of L_2 acquisition cannot be given on the basis of the target language (TL) alone. There are additional factors that shape the progress of development. Two major ones have been suggested: language transfer and language universals" (Gass 1984, 115).

Other reseachers pursue an understanding of the SLA process from a social/psychological perspective. They seek to determine how characteristics of individual learners and groups of learners influence the rate and the ultimate level of proficiency attained in the second language. More precisely these researchers examine the language learning environments as well as the learners' attitude, intellectual abilities, personalities, or learning styles in order to identify the variable(s) that might explain the differential success which exists among learners (Lightbown 1984).

Still other researchers see cognition as central to an explanation of SLA. McLaughlin (1978), for example, proposes explanations for a general theory of human information processing. He specifically recommends the distinction between controlled and automatic processing be applied to the SLA context. He also discusses the usefulness of the concepts of schemata or syntactic infrastructures and discovery procedures or acquisition heuristics.

One of the earliest attempts to combine the perspectives from two of the three dimensions was Schumann's acculturation model. Schumann brings the linguistic and social/psychological dimensions together in his model. The social/psychological dimension is important in assessing the degree to which learners acculturate to the TL group. Schumann believes that the degree of acculturation controls the degree to which learners acquire the second language (Schumann 1978a). Social and psychological factors are seen by Schumann as constituting acculturation. The social factors include social dominance patterns, integration strategies, enclosure, cohesiveness and size, congruence, attitude, and the second language learning group's intended length of residence. The psychological factors in Schumann's model include language shock, culture shock, motivation, and ego permeability. Thus, learners who have a positive attitude towards speakers of the TL, who desire to integrate in-

to the community of speakers of the TL, and whose culture is congruent with the TL culture, among other factors, are likely to be more successful in acquiring the second language than learners not possessing these characteristics.

Schumann introduced the linguistic perspective in his model by asserting that the process of SLA on the one hand, and pidginization/decreolization on the other, were analogous. Early pidginization and beginning SLA both result from a language contact situation in which there is minimal acculturation. Decreolization and more advanced stages of SLA result from language contact situations where there is progressive acculturation leading to ultimate conformity to the TL norm (Schumann 1978b).

Perhaps the first model that addresses the complexity of SLA from a tridimensional linguistic, social/psychological, and cognitive perspective is Krashen's monitor theory. The five hypotheses that comprise the essence of the theory are as follows (Krashen 1982):

1. *The acquisition-learning hypothesis.* Adults have two distinct ways of developing competence in a second language: (1) by subconsciously acquiring, much as children acquire their mother tongues or (2) by learning—by the accumulation of conscious knowledge of the rules of the language.
2. *The natural order hypothesis.* The acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order for all second language acquirers of a given TL.
3. *The monitor hypothesis.* What learners have learned (as opposed to acquired) is used for only one purpose. It functions as a monitor to allow learners to make changes in the form of what they have spoken or written. Acquisition, on the other hand, "initiates" utterances in a second language and is responsible for fluency.
4. *The input hypothesis.* Learners acquire language by receiving comprehensible input and attending not to its form, but to its message. In order to progress in second language acquisition, the comprehensible input must contain some structures that are beyond the learners' current level of competence.
5. *The affective filter hypothesis.* A filter exists in each learner which screens the input to which the learner is being exposed. If the learner's attitudes are positive, more of the input will be received; if negative, the input will not be received as well by the language acquisition device (LAD).

The two central points of Krashen's monitor theory that emerge from these hypotheses are that acquisition is the more important of the two

processes leading to acquired competence and that two conditions are thought to be necessary for acquisition. The first is that learners must obtain comprehensible input that is a bit beyond their current acquired level of competence. The second is that successful learners need to have a low or weak affective filter which will let the input in.

Readers will note that the claim that Krashen's theory is tridimensional is due to the fact that hypotheses 1, 3, and 4 relate to the cognitive dimension, hypothesis 2 to the linguistic, and hypothesis 5 to the social/psychological dimensions.

Another model that addresses all three dimensions is Hatch and Hawkins's (in press) integrated model. Their particular approach to account for SLA involves the following premises:

1. There is an interactive relationship among the three internal mental systems of linguistic knowledge, social knowledge, and cognitive knowledge. Knowledge is accumulated by learners in such a way that knowledge acquisition in one area acts as a scaffolding upon which the other knowledge system can be built. This process operates reciprocally.

2. There also exists an interactive relationship between external experience and these three internal mental systems. The systems evolve from the interpretation of our experiences for ourselves and for others.

3. The way learners organize the events of their experience so as to make the events interpretable is to create scripts or sequences of events in a particular context. We have scripts for how to go grocery shopping, for instance. "The knowledge necessary to create scripts is basically social knowledge" (Hatch and Hawkins, in press); however, much language is associated with scripts. Thus, language building accompanies script building.

4. One possible way in which language building transpires is through Incremental Procedural Grammar, a semantically driven grammar. (In their paper the authors detail how the grammar fits into their model; space restrictions prevent further discussion here).

The last formulation to be considered is Wong Fillmore and Swain's. Like Hatch and Hawkins, they include in their model the linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions in an interactive relationship. There are three essential components in their model, each with its own set of variables. The three components are the learner, the social context, and the users of the target language. The associated variables can affect "the rate, the course, and the ultimate outcome of learning. For example,

associated with the learner are such variables as personality, age, aptitude, motivation, and learning style. Associated with the social context are such variables as setting, social roles of the speakers, and status of the mother tongue and target language. And associated with the users of the target language are such variables as the expansions, repetitions, clarifications, and other such adjustments that the target language users make, the actual target language being used, and the relationship between the target language and the learner's first language" (Wong Fillmore and Swain 1984, part 1: 14–15).

The social processes in Wong Fillmore and Swain's model are those which bring learners together with target language speakers in a setting where communication in the target language can and does take place. Linguistic processes affect both learners and target language speakers. These processes involve the TL speakers' assumptions that "cause [the speakers] to select, modify, and support the linguistic data that get produced" (Wong Fillmore and Swain 1984, part 2: 1). The learners' assumptions affect the interpretations they give to linguistic data with which they are confronted. Cognitive processes include inference, categorization, and memory, among others. Language acquisition proceeds only when all three of these processes interact.

In conclusion, a final point regarding SLA and theory making is worth stating. A theory is a comprehensive, explicit, empirically verifiable account of what is known about a phenomenon.

According to Long (1985) there are two types of theories. The first type, termed a *set-of-laws theory*, summarizes what we *understand* about the phenomenon under investigation. It is a compilation of a series of (often related) statements that have been derived by repeated observations of relationships known to have an impact on the phenomenon. Each of these statements must be tested and validated independently. Furthermore, they must contain no unoperationalizable constructs.

The second type of theory seeks to *explain* the phenomenon under investigation. This type is termed a *causal-process theory*. The statements contained in causal-process theories are related and specify "not only *when* or *that* a process (such as SLA) will occur, but *how* and *why*" (Long 1985, 6). In order to explain a phenomenon, the statements will have to be comprehensive and testable.

Given either of these definitions, it is premature in my opinion to speak of theories of SLA. Schumann's acculturation model, for example, is insufficiently comprehensive to be labeled a theory. His model is restricted to explaining only naturalistic (i.e., untutored) SLA, and he ignores the cognitive dimension altogether. Furthermore, at this time it is difficult to see how acculturation can be measured, thus hindering attempts to put his central hypothesis to the test.

Krashen's monitor theory is more comprehensive, but it contains

untestable hypotheses (because of the unoperationalizable constructs) and so is "unfalsifiable in its current formulation" (Long 1985, 8). Moreover, what is known about SLA under conditions Krashen describes as propitious for acquisition would seem to argue against the two central points of Krashen's theory as stated earlier. Comprehensible input with a low/weak affective filter is not sufficient for language acquisition "unless one can tolerate sometimes (1) quite limited levels and (2) slow rates of attainment" (Long, forthcoming).

Hatch and Hawkins, and Wong Fillmore and Swain, on the other hand, make no claim that their work has resulted in either type of theory of SLA. What they have been engaged in is model building—identifying the components of the SLA process and beginning to show how they interrelate.

Thus, the state of our knowledge is such that no comprehensive theory yet exists. This is not to deny the value in considering what we do know; in fact, that is precisely the purpose of an information exchange. Nor is it to deny the fact that one day a theory will exist—a modified version of one of the models presented here perhaps or some new formulation. In any event, prior to that time the kind of research and model building, both uni- and multidimensional, described here will do much to contribute to our ultimate success in understanding and explaining second language acquisition.

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